Israel's Ukraine Dilemma

By Itamar Rabinovich

TEL AVIV – As if there were not already enough tension between Israeli Prime Minister Binyamin Netanyahu's government and US President Barack Obama's administration, Israel has refused to join the United States and its other allies in condemning Russia's annexation of Crimea. But that decision, though risky, is not altogether surprising: The US, after all, lacks an effective policy toward Russia in the Middle East, making it difficult for countries like Israel to stand up to the Kremlin.

The latest controversy emerged when a senior US official complained to the influential Israeli newspaper *Ha'aretz* about Israel's refusal to condemn Russia's actions in Ukraine or to support Ukraine's territorial integrity in the United Nations General Assembly. It makes no sense, the official declared, for a country that relies so heavily on US aid and diplomatic support to turn its back on its most important ally at such a critical moment.

Israel's government responded by trying to placate the US. Israeli Foreign Minister Avigdor Lieberman, in a meeting with US National Security Adviser Susan Rice and others, explained that Israel could not antagonize Russia for fear that it would provide Syria with sophisticated weapons systems (primarily S-300 anti-aircraft missiles) – a move that would upend the *status quo* in Israel's strategic environment.

Netanyahu, it should be noted, tried to convince Russian President Vladimir Putin not to complete precisely that arms deal last year. And Putin has already warned that intervention in Ukraine would have consequences in the Middle East. While a UN General Assembly vote can hardly be defined as intervention, Israel is not willing to take any chances.

This is not the first time that Putin has intimidated Israel. When he threatened retaliation for Israel's defense relationship with Georgia under former President Mikhail Saakashvili, a Kremlin foe, Israel acquiesced, abandoning the provision of weapons systems and relevant training.

But, when it comes to Israel's deteriorating relationship with the US, Putin is not really the problem; Obama and Netanyahu are. While the bilateral relationship has undoubtedly experienced highs and lows, historically there has generally been a sense of trust – even warmth – between the countries' leaders. That is sorely lacking today.

This chill extends to other top officials, especially in Israel. The country's defense minister, Moshe Ya'alon, recently insulted US Secretary of State John Kerry and ridiculed America's "weakness" in the international arena.

Further complicating matters is Lieberman, who hails from the former Soviet Union and has played a role – albeit a marginal one – in managing the bilateral relationship. Though Lieberman has lately been advocating closer coordination with the US, his recent statements on the crisis in Ukraine, in which he discussed Israel's relationships with the US and Russia in the same terms – as if they were completely equal – have raised the ire of US officials.

Rhetoric aside, Israel – like other US allies in the Middle East – is worried about America's gradual withdrawal from the region, a policy shift that has allowed Russia to regain lost influence there. And Russia has plenty of clout, employing its considerable diplomatic assets to affect the negotiations with Iran, while using weapons supplies to pursue its interests in troubled countries, from Syria to Egypt.

Against this background, Israeli officials have increasingly argued that Israel need not intervene in Russia's relationships with the Ukraine or the US, and should instead protect its interests vis-à-vis Russia. Moreover, they have declared that hostile members of Obama's administration have intentionally blown the issue out of proportion for their own political ends. And they have pointed out that Israel's vote in the UN would not have made much difference, anyway.

Whatever the merits of either side's perspective, the bottom line is that rising tension over the Ukraine crisis is jeopardizing the bilateral relationship – benefiting neither country. Both governments need to take stock of their positions and figure out a way to compromise.

Obviously, Israel must pursue its own foreign policy, which it cannot develop and implement if it blindly supports every aspect of US policy. Likewise, the US does not need an Israel that depends completely on US support, without its own resources and relationships.

But Israel must not play fast and loose with its most important strategic relationship. While Israeli officials are technically right that the country's vote in the UN would have had little impact, its symbolic value cannot be overstated. With Israel's international standing determined largely by its close relationship with the US, its failure to support the US at such a sensitive moment is highly meaningful – and widely noticed. For its part, the US must recognize the correlation between its declining interest and influence in the Middle East and Israel's current dilemma.

It is not up to Israel to prevent Russia from selling missiles and air-defense systems to Syrian President Bashar al-Assad's regime or attempting to regain a dominant role in the region. Nor is it Israel's place to get between the US and Russia in Ukraine. If Russia has created a linkage between Eastern Europe and the Middle East, America's allies in the region expect their superpower friend to make it work in their favor, not to allow it to undermine further an already-delicate regional security balance.